

## NEWMAN, CONVERSION, AND ECUMENISM

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THE CENTENARY of Cardinal Newman's death, on Aug. 11, 1890, has occasioned a large number of conferences and studies dealing with various aspects of his work. The present article is intended as a part of this commemoration. As one who came to the Catholic faith in adult life, Newman reflected long and deeply about his own religious pilgrimage and became the adviser of many companions and followers. He therefore deserves to be remembered as one of the great theologians of conversion. Because of his comprehensive vision of Christianity as a whole and his lifelong concern with overcoming Christian divisions, he has also been hailed as a forerunner of ecumenism.<sup>1</sup> His observations on Christian unity in some respects anticipate the directions of the Second Vatican Council. But there was in his thinking a tension between the convert and the ecumenist, the apologist for Catholicism and the friendly observer of other Christian communions. His efforts to be faithful to his dual vocation as a convert and as an ecumenist make his thought particularly relevant today, when a number of distinguished ecumenists, without loss of their ecumenical commitment, have felt the call to enter into full communion with the Church of Rome.

### THE CONVERT

Newman's conversion was slow, deliberate, and painful, but by no means halfhearted. For more than five years, from 1839 to 1845, he felt an increasing realization that the Church of England, to which he belonged, was not a part of the Catholic Church. But even so, he hesitated to sever his ties. In June 1844 he wrote to John Keble explaining his reluctance:

As far as I can see, all inducements and temptations are for remaining quiet, and against moving. The loss of friends what a great evil is this! the loss of position,

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Fries, "John Henry Newman: Ein Wegbereiter der christlichen Einheit," *Catholica* 15 (1961) 60-70. See also John Coulson, A. M. Allchin, and Meriol Trevor, *Newman: A Portrait Restored. An Ecumenical Reevaluation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1965); Johannes Artz, "Newman als Brücke zwischen Canterbury und Rom," *Una sancta* 22 (1967) 173-85; Werner Becker, "Ökumenische Aspekte der Katholizität John Henry Newmans," in *Festgabe Joseph Lortz*, ed. Erwin Iserloh and Peter Manns (Baden-Baden: Bruno Grimm, 1958) 2:481-505; Matthias Laros, "Kardinal Newmans ökumenische Sendung," *ibid.* 2:469-79.

of name, of esteem—such a stultification of myself—such a triumph to others. It is no proud thing to unsay what I have said, to pull down what I have attempted to build up. And again, what quite pierces me, the disturbance of mind which a change on my part would cause to so many, . . . the temptation to which many would be exposed of scepticism, indifference, and even infidelity.<sup>2</sup>

In November 1844 he continued to dwell on the obstacles to conversion. He wrote to Henry Edward Manning, who was still an Anglican at the time: "I have no existing sympathies with Roman Catholics. I hardly ever, even abroad, was at one of their services—I know none of them. I do not like what I hear of them."<sup>3</sup>

A few months later, in a letter of January 8, 1845, he said that he did not know whether he was in favor of people moving from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism since "the state of the Roman Catholics is at present so unsatisfactory." He then added: "The simple question is, Can *I* (it is personal, not whether another, but can *I*) be saved in the English Church? am *I* in safety, were I to die tonight?"<sup>4</sup> Having answered this question for himself, he wrote to his sister Jemima on March 15, 1845: "I am giving up a maintenance, involving no duties, and adequate to all my wants. . . . I have a good name with many; I am deliberately sacrificing it. . . . I am going to those whom I do not know and of whom I expect very little. . . . Oh, what can it be but a stern necessity which causes this?"<sup>5</sup>

Newman became a Roman Catholic because deep study had convinced him that it was impossible to be in the one, holy, catholic Church without being in communion with Rome. This remained his position for the rest of his life. He frequently spoke of the Roman communion as "the only true Church, the ark of salvation,"<sup>6</sup> as the "One Fold of Christ,"<sup>7</sup> and as "the only religious body . . . in which *is* salvation."<sup>8</sup> The true Church, for Newman, must necessarily be a single communion and could not contain elements that were "independent of the whole, discordant with one another in doctrine and in ritual, destitute of mutual intercommunion."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> June 8, 1844; cf. Ian Ker, *John Henry Newman: A Biography* (Oxford: Clarendon, reprint [with corrections] 1989) 286.

<sup>3</sup> Nov. 16, 1844; cf. Ker, *JHN* 293.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Newman's *Apologia pro vita sua* (new ed., London: Longmans, Green, 1895) 230–31.

<sup>5</sup> Ker, *JHN* 297.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Miss Rowe, Sept. 16, 1873, in *Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman* (Vols. 1–6, Oxford: Clarendon, 1978–84; Vols. 11–22, London: Nelson, 1961–72; Vols. 23–31, Oxford: Clarendon, 1973–77) 26:364; henceforth *LD*. Earlier, in *Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* (1850; new edition, Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1969), Newman expressed his "intimate sense that the Catholic Church is the one ark of salvation" (1:4) and is "that Church in which alone is salvation" (1:5).

<sup>7</sup> Letter to Edward Husband, July 17, 1870; *LD* 25:161.

<sup>8</sup> Letter of Dec. 20, 1881 to Mrs. Christie; *LD* 30:33.

<sup>9</sup> *Difficulties of Anglicans* 1:170.

Since Anglicans and Roman Catholics were not in mutual communion, they could not both be parts or branches of one and the same Church.

#### NEGATIVE JUDGMENTS ON OTHER COMMUNIONS

When Newman as a Catholic speaks of other ecclesial communities, he does not sound, by 20th-century standards, very ecumenical. Yet he is far more positive than many of his contemporaries, such as Cardinal Manning and the fiery lay convert William George Ward. He is willing to grant that grace is given and received in such communities, partly because they have retained certain elements of the Catholic patrimony, and partly because they may be expected to benefit from God's uncovenanted mercies.

In speaking of the Orthodox (or, as he calls it, "Greek") Church, Newman admits that it has true sacraments, a valid sacrifice of the Mass, and authentic priestly orders.<sup>10</sup> But the priests and the flock of that Church are, he says, merely passive believers; their religion has become mechanical and superstitious.<sup>11</sup> Since both the Byzantine and the Russian Church were merely local or national, their existence, for Newman, constituted no serious objection against the catholicity of the Roman communion.<sup>12</sup> Newman dismissed the long period of separation from the West as "eight centuries . . . of religious deadness and insensibility."<sup>13</sup> Yet he maintained that in the Crimean War England should have supported Russia, as a Christian power, rather than Turkey.<sup>14</sup>

If Newman was reserved about the Orthodox, he was even more sparing in his praise for the Protestants and Anglicans. To some degree they too lived off the biblical and sacramental patrimony of the Catholic Church. They had a valid baptism and had picked up some scattered fragments of that "large floating body of Catholic truth" that had been "poured into all quarters of the globe," while being found "in fulness and purity in the Church alone."<sup>15</sup> Newman dared to hope that the Bible and the Anglican Prayer Book retained enough Catholic truth for many Protestants to be saved.<sup>16</sup> In a letter of April 16, 1841, written in the latter stages of his Anglican period, he wrote to the Catholic theologian Charles W. Russell that the long duration of Protestantism was evidence that it must contain many and great truths, for so much piety and earnestness must be rooted

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 1:353.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 1:351.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 1:343.

<sup>13</sup> "Lectures on the History of the Turks" (1853), in *Historical Sketches* (London: Basil, Montagu, Pickering, 1872) 1:192.

<sup>14</sup> Ker, *JHN* 403.

<sup>15</sup> *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* (1850; new impression, London: Longmans, Green, 1909) 174.

<sup>16</sup> *Difficulties of Anglicans* 1:357.

in a measure of truth.<sup>17</sup> As a Catholic, Newman apparently adhered to this position. In one of his last letters he testified that he continued to cherish "those great and burning truths" that he had learned from Calvinist Evangelicals as a boy.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless he denied that he owed anything religiously to Protestantism, for he held that the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnation, grace, election, good works, and divine life in the soul, which he had imbibed from Evangelical authors such as Thomas Scott, were not characteristics of Protestantism but parts of the old Catholic truth that had come down from Christian antiquity.<sup>19</sup>

In his *Lectures on Justification* (1838) Newman vehemently attacked Luther for having left Christians in bondage to their feelings and for leading many to disbelieve in the efficacy of the sacraments. These lectures are in many respects quite polemical, being directed primarily against the Evangelical doctrine of justification by faith alone. But even here Newman did not repudiate what he himself had learned as a young Evangelical. Rather, he completed it by showing how faith brings the believer to obedience and sacramental life. Louis Bouyer remarks that Newman's thought on justification, as expressed in these lectures, holds

enormous consequences for ecumenism. It means that reunion with Catholicism will not force Protestants to abandon anything in this their rightly cherished, most fundamental spiritual intuition. If anything, they will have to give it a more searching reappraisal and a more radical development than they have ever done heretofore. By the same token, if Catholicism is to be truer to itself and to its own proper principles, it must not only take this and other Protestant intuitions seriously, but, recognizing that they issue from authentically Catholic wellsprings, it must set about to reintegrate them in an effective way into both its theory and its practice.<sup>20</sup>

Regarding the Protestant and Anglican churches as cut off from the true communion, Newman was convinced that they were not true churches and that their ministrations could not be blessed with cove-

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Ker, *JHN* 226.

<sup>18</sup> Letter of Feb. 24, 1887 to George T. Edwards; *LD* 31:189.

<sup>19</sup> See unpublished letter of Nov. 1, 1864, in the archives of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. This letter, to an unknown addressee, was quoted in full by Patrick T. Brannan in a paper delivered at the Newman Centenary Celebration at the University of Pennsylvania on May 15, 1990.

<sup>20</sup> Louis Bouyer, Preface to Thomas L. Sheridan, *Newman on Justification* (Staten Island, N.Y.: Alba, 1967) 12. In a recent article an eminent Anglican ecumenist remarks on the highly polemical character of the *Lectures on Justification* and on Newman's unfairness to Luther, but he concludes: "Like much else in Newman, the book is among the major monuments of the modern ecumenical movement." See Henry Chadwick, "The *Lectures on Justification*," in *Newman after a Hundred Years*, ed. Ian Ker and Alan G. Hill (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 287-308; quotation from 308.

nanted graces. He was doubtful—and increasingly doubtful as the years passed—about the validity of Anglican ordinations.<sup>21</sup> But he was optimistic about the abundance of the unpromised visitations of God's mercy. He compared dissident churches to the Ten Tribes after they had been separated from the kingdom of David and the Aaronic priesthood. Just as God had sent prophets such as Elijah and Elisha to the schismatic Israelites, so he might raise up holy ministers among Protestants and Anglicans.<sup>22</sup>

In a seemingly harsh judgment, Newman declared that the grace given in the Church of England did not come from that church, which was in his estimation nothing but "a tomb of what was once living, the casket of a treasure which has been lost."<sup>23</sup> Anglicans, he said, could no more receive grace from their own church than "an infant could receive nourishment from the breast of its dead mother."<sup>24</sup>

#### THE ANGLICAN ESTABLISHMENT

Newman's ambivalent attitude toward the Church of England becomes dramatically manifest in the series of statements he made over the years about the establishment of Anglicanism as the national religion. In three letters written in late 1850 and early 1851 to the Catholic layman J. M. Capes, Newman warned him against launching a crusade against the Establishment. Newman said that he looked on the Church of England as "a bulwark against infidelity," in the shadow of which all the dissenting churches lived. While the established Church existed, it served, according to Newman, as a witness to revelation and to dogmatic and ritual religion. If the Anglican establishment were to go, infidel literature would, so to speak, flood the market. The Catholic Church was not yet strong enough in England to take the place of the Establishment.<sup>25</sup>

In 1860 Newman declined to take part in building a new Catholic church at Oxford, on the ground that it might lead to controversy with the Anglicans there. In a letter to Bishop Ullathorne's secretary, Canon E. E. Estcourt, he explained his reasons at some length:

While I do not see my way to take steps to weaken the Church of England, being

<sup>21</sup> In a letter of July 30, 1857 to Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle, Newman takes the irreverence of the Anglican clergy toward the Blessed Sacrament as indirect evidence that they do not validly consecrate; see *LD* 18:103–5. Writing to Edward Husband on July 17, 1870, Newman remarks that when he became a Catholic in 1845 he did not yet have "that utter distrust of the Anglican Orders which I feel in 1870"; see *LD* 25:160.

<sup>22</sup> *Apologia* 154, referring to four sermons preached at the end of 1843.

<sup>23</sup> Letter to Helen Douglas Forbes, Oct. 4, 1864; *LD* 21:249.

<sup>24</sup> Letter to Mrs. Christie, Dec. 20, 1881; *LD* 30:34.

<sup>25</sup> Letters of Dec. 24, 1850, and Feb. 9 and Feb. 18, 1851; *LD* 14:173, 207, 213–14.

what it is, least of all should I be disposed to do so in Oxford, which has hitherto been the seat of those traditions which constitute whatever there is of Catholic doctrine and principle in the Anglican Church. . . . Till things are very much changed there, in weakening Oxford, we are weakening our friends, weakening our own *de facto* παιδαγωγός into the Church. Catholics did not make us Catholics; Oxford made us Catholics. At present Oxford surely does more good than harm. . . .

I go further than a mere tolerance of Oxford; as I have said, I wish to suffer the Church of England. The Establishment has ever been a breakwater against Unitarianism, fanaticism, and infidelity. It has ever loved us better than Puritans and Independents have loved us. And it receives all that abuse and odium of dogmatism, or at least a good deal of it, which otherwise would be directed against us.<sup>26</sup>

In subsequent years Newman maintained approximately the same position. In a letter of June 7, 1863 to his Anglican friend Isaac Williams, he wrote: "The Anglican Church has been a most useful breakwater against scepticism," but in the same letter he expressed his fears that latitudinarian opinions were spreading furiously in the Church of England.<sup>27</sup>

In his *Apologia pro vita sua*, written the following year, Newman recalled his long-standing "firm belief that grace was to be found within the Anglican Church"<sup>28</sup> and he added an appendix on "The Anglican Church" in which he called it "to a certain point, a witness and teacher of religious truth."<sup>29</sup> In an autobiographical vein he said, "the Church of England has been the instrument of Providence in conferring great benefits on me." "While Catholics are so weak in England," he continued, "it is doing our work." It is therefore "a serviceable breakwater against doctrinal errors more fundamental than its own." For all these reasons he wished to avoid anything that would weaken its hold upon the public mind or "lessen its maintenance of those great Christian and Catholic principles and doctrines which it has up to this time successfully preached."<sup>30</sup>

In a letter of Nov. 1, 1864 to an unknown addressee Newman observed:

With a violent hand the State kept down the multitude of sects which were laying England waste during the Commonwealth. The State kept out Unitarianism, not to say infidelity, at the era of the Revolution. It was the State which prevented the religious enthusiasm of the Methodist revival from destroying dogma. At this

<sup>26</sup> Letter of June 2, 1860; *LD* 19:352. This letter was not sent in exactly the same form as is here quoted from Newman's draft.

<sup>27</sup> *LD* 20:460.

<sup>28</sup> *Apologia* 227, referring to a letter of September 1844.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 340.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

moment, destroy the establishment of Anglicanism, and the consequences would be terrible.<sup>31</sup>

Here Newman might have left the matter except that Edward Pusey, in a pamphlet, paraphrased Newman as holding that the Anglican Church was “the great bulwark against infidelity in this land.” Cardinal Manning, in a response to Pusey, rejected this estimate. In his public *Letter to Pusey* of 1865 Newman felt obliged to deny that he had ever deliberately called the Anglican Church a bulwark; he repeated from the *Apologia* that he viewed it as a “serviceable breakwater against errors more fundamental than its own.” Unlike a bulwark, he explained, a breakwater is not an integral part of what it defends, and is serviceable if, without excluding error altogether, it detracts from the volume and force of error.<sup>32</sup>

#### ALTERNATIVES BETWEEN ATHEISM AND CATHOLICITY

As a convert, Newman had to ask himself whether he could make a definitive commitment to his new faith. This raised for him the further question whether certitude in matters of religion was irreversible. In numerous publications he took the position that religious certitudes are, at least normally, irreversible.

We have already seen that Newman as a Catholic continued to affirm what he had previously believed as an Evangelical Christian. He also retained the convictions he acquired as an Anglican regarding the existence of a visible Church, the sacramental system, and the dogmatic decrees of the early councils. His conversion was therefore not a repudiation but an affirmation of his past; it was continuous, progressive, and incremental.

More precisely, we may say that Newman experienced in himself something analogous to the cumulative process that he attributed to the whole Church in his famous *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. He began, as did the Church at its infancy, with an indistinct global ideal not yet articulated in dogmatic form. As a young man, he came to accept the great Trinitarian and Christological doctrines that were common to all major Christian denominations; then in his years at Oxford he perceived the major ecclesiological and sacramental implications, and at length came to embrace the doctrines specific to post-Reformation Roman Catholicism. His earlier beliefs prepared the way for the acceptance of the later ones.

<sup>31</sup> Unpublished letter in archives of Archdiocese of Philadelphia; see n. 19 above.

<sup>32</sup> Text in *Difficulties of Anglicans* 2:1-170, esp. 9-11. Newman at this point had presumably forgotten having called the Anglican establishment a “bulwark” in the private letter to Capes of Dec. 24, 1850, mentioned above.

Already as an Anglican, in the last of his Oxford University Sermons (1843), Newman held that the Catholic idea is one and that it implicitly includes all the dogmas. "These propositions imply each other, as being parts of one whole; so that to deny one is to deny all, and to invalidate one is to deface and destroy the view itself."<sup>33</sup>

In a whole series of writings Newman spoke of the stages by which an individual comes to a fuller appreciation of the contents of the faith. In his *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* he taught that

once a man has a real hold of the great doctrine that there is a God, in its true meaning and bearings, then (provided there is no disturbing cause, no peculiarities in his circumstances, involuntary ignorance, or the like), he will be led on without an effort, as by a natural continuation of that belief, to believe also in the Catholic Church as God's messenger or prophet. . . .<sup>34</sup>

The most complete statement of Newman's position on this point is in the *Grammar of Assent* (1870), in which he analyzes the steps by which a sincere Protestant might find his way to Catholicism. A Protestant who assents to the doctrine of our Lord's divinity with a real assent, he concludes, is easily led to welcome the Catholic doctrine of the Real Presence and that of Mary as Mother of God (*theotokos*).<sup>35</sup>

Ten years later, in a new edition of the *Grammar of Assent*, Newman added an endnote explaining that the first principles, sentiments, and tastes that incline one to accept any revealed truth constitute an *organum investigandi* leading the mind by an infallible succession from the rejection of atheism to monotheism, from monotheism to Christianity, from Christianity to Evangelical religion, and from there to Catholicity.<sup>36</sup>

Corresponding to this theory of an ascending logic leading from theism to Catholicity, Newman postulated a descending movement. The disposition that inclines a person to doubt or reject any revealed truth will, if consistently pursued, terminate in total infidelity. Thus, in his *Discourses to Mixed Congregations* he argued that when a person ceases to believe in the Church, there is "nothing in reason to keep him from doubting the existence of God."<sup>37</sup> "Unlearn Catholicism," he wrote, "and you open the way to your becoming a Protestant, Unitarian, Deist, Pantheist, Sceptic, in a dreadful but inevitable succession."<sup>38</sup> Already in 1845

<sup>33</sup> "The Theory of Developments in Religious Doctrine," Sermon 15 of Newman's University Sermons, ed. D. M. MacKinnon and J. D. Holmes (London: SPCK, 1970) 336.

<sup>34</sup> Discourse 13, "Mysteries of Nature and of Grace" 261.

<sup>35</sup> *Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (1870; 7th ed., London: Longmans, Green, 188) 245.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 499.

<sup>37</sup> *Discourses to Mixed Congregations*, Discourse 13, p. 261.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 282.



Newman had read the autobiography of Blanco White, an Oxford friend who had forsaken the Catholicism of his youth and had ended as a pantheist.<sup>39</sup>

In the *Apologia* (1864) Newman gives a very succinct summary of his two-edged principle. He reports that by 1844 he had come to the conclusion "that there was no medium, in true philosophy, between Atheism and Catholicity, and that a perfectly consistent mind, under those circumstances in which it finds itself here below, must embrace either the one or the other."<sup>40</sup>

This double principle is perhaps Newman's most seminal contribution to ecumenical theology. Non-Catholics, to be sure, could hardly be expected to agree that the fulness of truth was to be found only in Roman Catholic Christianity. But the formula challenged Catholics to acknowledge the salutary value of the faith of non-Catholic Christians and motivated Catholics to help these other Christians to deepen their own faith rather than renounce it. By subordinating the acceptance of particular dogmas to personal adherence to the revealed idea, Newman provided an explanation of the existence of authentic faith among Christians whose doctrines were, by Catholic standards, deficient. As Newman knew from his own experience, it takes time and favorable circumstances to grasp certain doctrinal implications of the Christian faith commitment. But at the same time Newman's principle avoided any reductionism. He insisted that sincere believers must continue to explore the implications of what they believe and thus to progress toward the fulness of Catholic truth, even as the Church itself must continue to ponder the apostolic deposit and draw out its meaning and consequences. By the same token, Newman warned against the casual dismissal of any revealed doctrine, inasmuch as the totality of dogma is a single indivisible system.

#### REFORM OF THE CHURCH

While accepting without question the whole system of Catholic dogma, Newman was quite aware that the Church, as it existed in history, suffered from many human defects. He would not have become a Catholic unless he had learned to think critically of the Church in which he found himself. As a Protestant, Newman frequently reminded Catholics that their Church needed to reform itself before Protestants could be attracted to it. In a letter to an Irish theologian he exclaimed: "O that you would reform your worship, that you would disown the extreme honors paid to St Mary and other Saints, your traditionary view of Indulgences, and the veneration paid in foreign countries to Images!"<sup>41</sup> Although Protestantism was itself an aberration, it was a reaction, Newman believed, to

<sup>39</sup> Ker, *JHN* 298.

<sup>40</sup> *Apologia* 198.

<sup>41</sup> To C. W. Russell, Apr. 13, 1841; Ker, *JHN* 225.

"some very grave errors on the side of Rome."<sup>42</sup> But as he drew nearer to Catholicism, Newman recognized that the Protestant Reformers had been disingenuous in attributing to Roman Catholics many tenets and practices that Catholics in fact condemned.<sup>43</sup>

Newman, in fact, came to realize that many of his own previous charges against Rome, especially his identification of the pope with Antichrist, were themselves unjustified. In January 1843, more than two years before his conversion, he published a short retraction of some of his charges and epithets.<sup>44</sup> As a Catholic, he frequently asserted that the veneration and invocation of saints, including Mary, was not idolatrous or injurious to the sole mediatorship of Jesus Christ.<sup>45</sup>

Newman's whole career as a Catholic was marked by intermittent conflicts with hierarchical authorities and especially with Roman curial officials. Throughout these trials he remained remarkably patient. He never stridently protested; still less did he have any regrets about his conversion. He had come into the Church with open eyes, recognizing that on the human level it had many defects. As a quintessential Englishman, Newman felt a certain tension with the clerical culture of the Mediterranean world. In his diaries and personal letters he expressed the view that the Roman mentality was too abstract and doctrinaire to deal with the realities of the religious situation as he experienced it in England.

As a convert, Newman brought with him into the Church a critical spirit formed in the tradition of British philosophy. Nowhere does this appear so brilliantly as in his 1877 Preface to the third edition of his *Via Media*.<sup>46</sup> Here he depicts the Church as a complex reality that preserves itself through the constant interaction of three principles—the rational, the devotional, and the political. The theologians, representing the rational or critical principle, tend to be cold, detached, even skeptical. The body of the faithful, representing the devotional, provide warmth and conviction, but they are inclined toward superstitious excesses. The hierarchical leaders, representing the political, provide unity and order, but they are tempted to make decisions based on mere expediency. Within the Church as a whole these three elements offset one another's weaknesses and thus provide a healthy equilibrium.

As a theologian, Newman greatly appreciated the importance of theo-

<sup>42</sup> To C. W. Russell, Apr. 26, 1841; Ker, *JHN* 226.

<sup>43</sup> To R. W. Church, Sept. 12, 1841; Ker, *JHN* 227.

<sup>44</sup> In *The Via Media of the Anglican Church* (London: Longmans, Green, 1896) 2:427-33; cf. Ker, *JHN* 269, for the correct date of this retraction.

<sup>45</sup> See, e.g., his "Letter to Pusey," *Difficulties of Anglicans* 2:91-96.

<sup>46</sup> In *The Via Media of the Anglican Church* 1 (new impression, London: Longmans, Green, 1911) xv-xciv. See Avery Dulles, "The Threefold Office in Newman's Ecclesiology," in *Newman after a Hundred Years* 129-52.

logical debate and reflection. His patristic studies gave him a sense of the slow historical processes by which errors are sifted out and corrected. He esteemed a measure of private judgment and local autonomy as one of the prerequisites without which no consensus could be genuine. It was Newman's vocation and destiny to oppose the excesses of Roman centralization. For this he earned some official distrust in his own lifetime, but has won the acclaim of later generations. The ecumenical importance of Newman's principles for the self-criticism and self-reform of the Church was to be recognized by 20th-century successors such as Yves Congar and Hans Küng.

#### ECUMENICAL STRATEGY

Some features of Newman's ecumenical strategy have by now become apparent. He rejoiced in the common heritage shared by all believers and sought to confirm Christians of every communion in those doctrines and practices that belonged to the general patrimony. In the attitude of faith itself Newman found an implicit commitment to the entire content of revelation and a promise of healthy growth.

One of the pillars of Newman's ecumenical policy was undoubtedly his conviction that everyone is subjectively obliged to follow the biddings of conscience. "I have always contended," he once wrote, "that obedience even to an erring conscience was the way to gain light."<sup>47</sup>

Sensitive to the precepts of conscience, Newman was on guard against unsettling other Christians in their faith. On the very day of his reception into the Catholic Church he wrote to his sister Jemima that his acceptance of the claims of the Roman Catholic Church was entirely "consistent with believing, as I firmly do, that individuals in the English Church are invisibly knit into that True Body of which they are not outwardly members—and consistent too with thinking it highly injudicious, indiscreet, wanton to interfere with them in particular cases. . . ."<sup>48</sup> While he wanted to urge those who were suitably prepared to take the step of becoming Catholics, he did not wish to undermine the piety of English popular religion. Far removed from fundamentalism, Newman was dubious about the historical accuracy of many biblical stories; but he lamented the reckless attacks of liberals on the reliability of the Bible because they deprived conservative Protestants of a needed support. "To unsettle the minds of a generation, when you give them no landmarks and no causeway across the morass is to undertake a great responsibility."<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Letter to Mrs. William Froude, early 1844; Ker, *JHN* 284.

<sup>48</sup> Letter of Oct. 9, 1845; *LD* 11:14.

<sup>49</sup> Letter to Malcolm Maccoll, March 24, 1861; *LD* 20:488.

Although Newman engaged freely in religious controversy when he felt it necessary to repel false charges, he observed certain ground rules. His published writings and his private correspondence alike are a model of frank and courteous dialogue. Believing that "it does not mend matters for us to conceal our mutual differences," he held that real disagreements ought to be confessed "plainly though in charity."<sup>50</sup> He sought always to give a moderate exposition of Catholic doctrine that would not shock and repel the very persons whom one was seeking to persuade. He was particularly opposed to vituperation and personal abuse. Writing on April 13, 1866 to Henry James Coleridge, the Jesuit editor of the *Month*, on the occasion of that journal's response to Pusey's *Eirenicon*, Newman stated: "Abuse is as great a mistake in controversy as panegyric in biography."<sup>51</sup> Those who respond to Dr. Pusey, he cautioned, should bear in mind that their aim is to convince readers who respect and love that author.

For many years Newman was in correspondence with Ambrose Philipps de Lisle, a Catholic layman who was enthusiastic about the prospects for reunion with the Anglicans. When de Lisle espoused the scheme of corporate union, Newman frankly appraised the project as unrealistic, for reasons we have already seen. The Anglican Church, he believed, had never been more than partially Catholic, and its ecclesiastical organization was fundamentally Erastian. To make that Church genuinely Catholic would be to fashion a new creature: "It would be to turn a panther into a hind."<sup>52</sup>

In 1876 de Lisle favored a scheme to form an Anglican Uniate Church patterned on the Uniate Churches of the East. Newman expressed sympathy with this effort to draw good people into the Church, but he felt that this complicated plan would not commend itself to the Holy See unless there were a likelihood of bringing in a large part of the Church of England.<sup>53</sup> The plan soon collapsed because the Anglo-Catholics were unwilling to accept the recently defined dogma of papal infallibility and the proposal of conditional reordination.<sup>54</sup>

In some of his writings Newman expressed a clear desire for individual conversions. We must be anxious, he said, for all those who close their eyes to their heresy or schism and refuse to act on their knowledge of the divinity of the Catholic Church.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, Newman as a Catholic refused to engage in a hunt for converts, and for this he was

<sup>50</sup> Letter to Principal David Brown, Jan. 18, 1873; *LD* 26:234.

<sup>51</sup> *LD* 22:211.

<sup>52</sup> Letter of March 3, 1866; *LD* 22:170.

<sup>53</sup> Letters to de Lisle of Jan. 19 and Jan. 27, 1876; *LD* 28:18, 20.

<sup>54</sup> Ker, *JHN* 695.

<sup>55</sup> *Difficulties of Anglicans* 1:358.

sometimes accused of a lack of zeal. In his *Journal* for January 21, 1863 he wrote:

At Propaganda, conversions, and nothing else, are the proof of doing *any* thing. Every where with Catholics, to make converts, is doing something; and not to make them, is 'doing nothing'. . . . But I am altogether different. . . . To me conversions were not the first thing, but the edification of Catholics. . . . I am afraid to make hasty converts of educated men, lest they should not have counted the cost, & should have difficulties after they have entered the Church. . . . [T]he Church must be prepared for converts, as well as converts prepared for the Church.<sup>56</sup>

The governing body of the Church, Newman surmised, were annoyed at his opinion that the Catholics of England were in need of a better education.<sup>57</sup>

While Newman was eager to receive individual converts who were properly prepared, he recognized that some might not have a personal call to make this step. When his friend Samuel F. Wood died in 1843, Newman wrote to his sister Jemima: "I think he considered the Church of Rome the true Church,—but thought God had placed him where he was"—that is to say, in the Anglican communion.<sup>58</sup> Some decades later Newman speculated that some Anglo-Catholics were providentially "kept where they were, with no more light than they have, being Anglicans in good faith in order gradually to prepare their hearers and readers in greater numbers than would otherwise be possible for the true and perfect faith."<sup>59</sup>

Newman does not seem to have had anything resembling an overall strategy for restoring the unity of Christendom, much as he desired that objective. It seems fair to say that he felt unable to visualize how this goal could come to pass. He was therefore content to lay the groundwork and to begin at the bottom. "Whatever tends to create a unity of heart between men of separate communions," he wrote, "lays the ground for advances towards a restoration of that visible unity, the absence of which among Christians is so great a triumph, and so great an advantage to the enemies of the Cross."<sup>60</sup> Toward the end of his life he became increasingly disturbed at the spread of atheism and irreligion, and as a result came to take greater satisfaction in the unity that already existed among religious minds. "I rejoice in it as one compensation of the cruel overthrow of faith

<sup>56</sup> John Henry Newman, *Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Henry Tristram (London and New York: Sheed & Ward, 1956) 257–58.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 259.

<sup>58</sup> Apr. 30, 1843; Ker 273.

<sup>59</sup> Letter to unknown correspondent, probably from early 1871; *LD* 25:260.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to Henry Allon, Jan. 28, 1868; *LD* 24:22.

which we see on all sides of us, that, as the setting of the sun brings out the stars, so great principles are found to shine out, which are hailed by men of various religions as their own in common, when infidelity prevails."<sup>61</sup>

In these final years Newman sensed the rise of what we would today call an ecumenical spirit. "Never did members of the various Christian communions feel such tenderness for each other."<sup>62</sup> The first step toward unity, Newman believed, must be "for religious minds, one and all, to live upon the Gospels."<sup>63</sup> In another letter, written in January 1873 to the same correspondent, he added that the result of the dawning movement toward unity must be placed in God's hands. The differences are real and beyond human power to solve. Nevertheless, Newman observed, "We may hope that our good God has not put into the hearts of religious men to wish and pray for unity, without intending in His own time to fulfill the prayer. . . . [W]e may humbly hope that in our day, and till He discloses to the hearts of men what the true faith is, He will, where hearts are honest, take the will [to unity] for the deed."<sup>64</sup>

#### NEWMAN AND VATICAN II

Catholic ecumenism, properly so called, is almost entirely a 20th-century phenomenon; it received its first real charter of legitimacy at the Second Vatican Council. In many respects, as others have said, Vatican II was Newman's council. It endorsed many of his general theological principles: for instance, his emphasis upon guidance of conscience and upon the inner workings of the instinct of faith in the minds of believers, as well as his recognition of the value of theological pluralism and the need for gradual historical development in matters of doctrine. Ecumenically, the recent council shared Newman's relatively optimistic assessment of the possibilities of saving faith among non-Catholic Christians who remain in good conscience outside the Catholic communion. It recognized the presence of grace, both covenanted and uncovenanted, in other Christian communities. It favored the kind of frank and open dialogue, unmarred by false irenicism, exemplified by Newman's letters, both private and published. The council also stressed, as did Newman, the intimate connection between the inner renewal of the Catholic Church itself and the prospects for broader Christian unity.

In one important respect Vatican II went beyond Newman. It held that the Orthodox churches and Protestant ecclesial communities have, as such, salvific importance.<sup>65</sup> Imperfect though they are, they in some

<sup>61</sup> Letter to Principal David Brown, Jan. 24, 1875; *LD* 27:188.

<sup>62</sup> To Principal Brown, Oct. 24, 1872; *LD* 26:187.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 188.

<sup>64</sup> To Principal Brown, Nov. 3, 1873; *LD* 26:381.

<sup>65</sup> *Unitatis redintegratio* 3.

way pertain to the mystery of the Church. The Church of Christ, consequently, is more inclusive than the Roman Catholic communion. Yet the mystery of the Church is realized in institutionally complete form in Roman Catholicism and not elsewhere. The doctrine of Vatican II on the "subsistence" of the Church of Christ in the Catholic communion<sup>66</sup> differs in subtle but significant ways from Newman's teaching that the Catholic Church, and it alone, is the one ark of salvation. If Newman had anticipated that development, he might not have been at such pains to deny that other Christian communities utterly lack the attributes of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. But this realization would not, I think, have altered his insistence on the importance for individuals and groups to enter into full communion with the Roman Catholic Church. For Vatican II, like Newman himself, taught that God had made the Catholic Church necessary for salvation and that all who are in a position to know this have an obligation to enter that Church and remain in it.<sup>67</sup>

Newman, we may conclude, was a forerunner, standing on the threshold of a new ecumenical age. In him the convert spoke louder than the ecumenist. But he did succeed in combining a loyal adherence to the Catholic Church with a deep concern for Christian unity and a measure of appreciation for the workings of grace in other Christian communions. His frank and realistic appraisal of the obstacles to union can be a salutary corrective for a generation that is tempted to minimize the distinctive claims of every religious body.

<sup>66</sup> *Lumen gentium* 8.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 14.